

# Thinking outside the urn: Art From Ashes joins Amherst Art Walk

By **THE DAILY HAMPSHIRE GAZETTE**  
Staff Writer

Thursday, April 1, 2010



JERREY ROBERTS

Art From Ashes offers a variety of glass art that incorporate human "cremains," like this glass globe by Robert Burch.

What appears to be a constellation of tiny white stars suspended in a glass paperweight from Amherst-based Art From Ashes is actually the ash from a cremated pet or loved one. And what appears to be an empty building at 35 South Pleasant Street in Amherst is actually an impromptu art gallery.

The three owners of Art From Ashes operate from a second-floor office of the otherwise vacant Pleasant Street property. For the March and April Amherst Art Walk, they have filled the rest of the building with a selection of their glass mementoes, which contain ashes of a deceased pet or loved one, as well as works by nearly two-dozen local artists.

Sisters Deb Brown and Jennifer Bourgeois, along with their friend Jane Giat, founded Art From Ashes in 2006 after Brown and Bourgeois' grandmother died and was cremated.

"We started to think - well, what do you do with the ashes?" said Brown. "When someone gets the ashes of a loved one back it comes in a funny little urn and you put it on your mantelpiece and people don't want to talk about it."

"Some people even hide it away in a drawer," Giat added.

The memory of the grandmother's extensive glass paperweight collection inspired the trio to use glass as an alternate, more personalized way to display "cremains." Brown recalled that her grandmother would let her and her sisters play with them by rolling them along the floor, and they never chipped or broke.

The three women contacted Robert Burch, a glass artist in Putney, Vt. Using the ashes of Bourgeois' dog, Lou, Burch learned how to incorporate ashes into glass without weights, walking sticks with glass tops, pendants, sun catchers, perfume bottles, vases and display stones, ranging in price from \$40 to \$750. Customers commission work as well, ordering everything from a martini glass to a purple dinosaur, a replica of a favorite dog toy.

Originally Art From Ashes worked solely with pet ashes, but now about half of their orders use human remains.

"People would shyly, sheepishly ask [about using human cremains]," said Giat. After a November, 2007, Newsweek article about Art From Ashes featured a customer who ordered a blue paperweight containing her mothers' ashes, the company received an explosion of orders for glasswork memorializing humans. It seemed like a natural development: The owners were quickly learning from customer feedback how meaningful the glass pieces could be.

"It's just something about the light coming through a piece of art glass that's really life affirming," Giat said.

Less than a teaspoon of ash goes into each piece. In some, the ash is visible as white specks deep inside the glass, suspended like stars or spiraling around swirls of color.

"We wanted it to be art first," Brown said. "For people to look at it and say, "oh, that's beautiful," and then you can tell or not tell [what it contains]."

Bourgeois, Brown and Giat hear a lot of stories from customers about beloved pets, relatives and friends. Their office has a special sitting room, complete with couches, a fireplace and glass samples, where customers can tell their stories and place orders, far from the bustle of the office environment.

Filling an empty space

Art from Ashes is the only remaining tenant in the building, tucked between Fresh Side and J. Austin Antiques.

"The building we're in was owned by my husband's family," said Brown. "It used to be a law firm but now we need a tenant."

The trio got the idea of displaying their art in the empty building from a realtor. They then started contacting local artists who agreed to display their work. "Since we've been sequestered in our office, it's been nice to connect with other artists," said Giat.

The show features tapestries by Maximo Laura, refurbished antique trunks by Kaye Dougan, fiber art by Nina Compagnon and glassworks by Robert Burch. Sixteen other local artists will show their watercolors, collage, pastel, photography, painting and monotypes.

After the show, Giat, Brown and Bourgeois may continue using the building as an occasional gallery space until they find tenants - perhaps someone who wants to convert it into a permanent gallery.

"That would be exceptional," Giat said.

The building will be open today from 5 to 8 p.m. for the April Art Walk.